



**Testimony regarding the Governor's Recommendations for the Department of Social Services
February 17, 2012**

Good evening Senator Harp, Representative Walker and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Lucy Nolan and I am the executive director of End Hunger Connecticut, a statewide anti-hunger and food security organization. Our primary mission is to create long term sustainable solutions to hunger. I also serve as the co-chair of the CT Nonprofit Human Services Cabinet which is a statewide coalition of 20 nonprofit human service providers and organizations representing approximately 800 providers. Our mission is to advance strong and unified nonprofit human services systems to effectively meet community needs.

I would like to commend the Governor for his support in moving DSS into this century. The Integrated Voice Recorded System, or Easy Call, has been very helpful. With any new program there are always glitches and there are some here. Overall it is working out well. EHC!'s eFax program is expanding, and we have seen very good results with the number of applications that are not denied due to inadequate information. Often the reason for denials or lack of timeliness for applications is due to lost paper work. Because our system keeps all the applications and the supporting documents online, and gets to DSS online, there is no paper lost. In fact, at last count only 1% of our applications were denied because of this.

Connecticut has close to 400,000 people on SNAP with an average monthly benefit per person of \$142.47. We are currently reaching 77% of those who are eligible. While our timeliness and error rate are not meeting the federal standards, we are doing something right. SNAP benefits are a lifesaver for so many people.

We oppose any cuts to the State-Funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SSNAP). This program provides state funded SNAP benefits/food stamps to legal immigrants in Connecticut. Many legal immigrants come to this country to make a new start and offer us in return their cultural experiences, creativity and, once settled and working, a strong tax base. The SNAP allows for legal immigrants to choose the foods they know how to cook rather than the foods given to them at a food pantry, which may be difficult to prepare and eat for them.

SSNAP provides food stamps to legal immigrants in Connecticut until they can participate in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the new name for food stamps. The USDA allows legal immigrant children, disabled legal immigrants and those who have been in the country for 5 or more years to receive federally SNAP benefits. However, it is during the first 5 years of a person's residency that this type of program is needed the most. Immigrants, many of whom are refugees, come to this country to make a new start and offer us in return their cultural experiences, creativity and, once settled and working, a strong tax base. This program fills the much needed gap left by SNAP rules.

Currently those who are on the SSNAP are receiving 75% of the federal SNAP benefit. The Governor's budget proposes to cut this benefit to 50% of the federal SNAP benefit which would hurt those who need this program at a most critical time. Those participating are receiving, on average, \$106 for the month, while the new proposal would cut this to \$71 per month, a significant cut to his or her food budget. We urge you not to make this drastic cut to those who are using the program, and especially NOT to change

the legal amount of the benefit to 50%. The savings to the state will *not* be significant yet the harm to the households using the program will be unbearable.

In 1996 Connecticut made a promise to ensure that immigrants that are documented would be eligible for food stamps. We are one of seven states that held onto that promise. The cost of the program is not high. Documented immigrants are not eligible until they have lived in the state for six months. After five years of residency in the United States they are eligible for federal SNAP benefits.

The Nutrition Assistance line pays for high nutritional value food such as proteins and produce for the state's emergency food sites. These funds are provided by the state's two food banks, Foodshare and Connecticut Food Bank to local area providers. These funds are very important as they provide funding for food that may not be donated in large quantities. It is important to note that the food banks can not charge more than 5 cents per pound for the food (and often much less) and pay the overage for transportation and administration out of their own general funds. It is a partnership between private and public charity. Additionally, I would like to add that this is the majority of funds that the state provides to emergency food providers therefore it is important to keep it in the budget especially when so many are using their services.

End Hunger Connecticut!, and the other outreach groups will continue to work to assure people are prepared to get their benefits. When people go to DSS fully prepared they are likely to get their benefits within the 30 days, and for the full amount. We will continue to advocate for those who do not get their benefits, need assistance with their redeterminations, and benefit checks. We know this works. We will do our part and we are glad to see that the state is finally focused on doing its part. Of course we will continue to train organization on SNAP outreach and application assistance so that applications are done correctly. Increased modernization efforts, a new phone system and additional staffing is *helping* to create greater access to SNAP.

Thank you.